Crispin Glover

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Innovative in his artistic outlook, marginal in his success, transgressive in his oddness, and excessive in his performances, Crispin Glover embodies cult stardom. A true cult auteur in many regards, one of his most recent endeavours is an internationally-toured live show called 'Crispin Glover's Big Slide Show', an event described in one press release as 'bewildering, unnerving, surreal, and blackly comic', and 'unsuitable for children' (Hodgson 2014). It mixes screening and live performance, showcasing Glover's own directorial effort *What Is It?* (2005), a film with a cast of actors with Down's Syndrome and described by Glover as 'Being the adventures of a young man whose principal interests are snails, salt, a pipe and how to get home as tormented by an hubristic racist inner psyche'.[i] A further feature of the Slide Show are readings and illustrations from Glover's re-working of 19th Century books, accompanied by an earnest over-the-top commentary which tends to be greeted with nervous laughter and rapturous applause.[ii] Aside from his own offbeat projects, much of his conventional fame stems from his early role as George McFly in *Back to the Future* (1985). Since then he has occupied a significant space in alternative independent cinema and cult television with scene-stealing supporting roles in *River's Edge* (1986),*Wild at Heart* (1990) and the Starz network's adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2017), and embellished mainstream productions with elaborate eccentricity, such as insisting his character in *Charlie's Angels* (2000) be reworked as mute.

Beyond the screen his outsider cult status was affirmed by an event at New York's Museum of Arts and Design which positioned him as "A unique voice… and pioneer within the cult cinema for his character actor roles in Hollywood blockbusters, the eponymous character in

the remake of *Willard*… and directing a series of independent feature films that explore alternative perspectives on contemporary life".[iii] Part of his cult identity has been consolidated via an unconventional approach to music, producing the album, *The Big Problem ≠ The Solution. The Solution = Let It Be* in 1989, which incorporates readings from a self-published book (*Oak-Mot*), a cover of 'These Boots are Made for Walking' and 'Clowny Clown Clown' (the latter's bizarre music video now archived on YouTube).[iv] Signifiers of his cult star persona abound elsewhere: his father Bruce Glover is also a cult character actor; Crispin has renovated a dilapidated chateaux in the Czech Republic; he has a 'cult look that is never deviated from (a black suit and narrow tie); and other cult figures (such as Juliette Lewis) interview him, confirming and extending their own offbeat status.[v] What Glover projects (and is projected upon him) is more 'cult aura' than 'cult image', even cameoing as Andy Warhol in Oliver Stone's *The Doors* (1991).

But, whilst Glover personifies an auratic identity rooted in the cult and alternative, he remains an actor with a distinct presence in Hollywood filmmaking. Within Glover lies a constant negotiation between the mainstream, the familiar, the niche and the subcultural and between industry and independence, but unlike other cult stars, this is not necessarily one of conflict. My chapter will emphasise the increasing significance of industrial and economic sites for this, but Glover's cult status certainly exists at the cultural and ideological level that is typical to cult stardom. An article in *The New Yorker* (McGrath 2006) illustrates the wide gamut of Glover's movie star existence. A profile of the late YouTube star Stevie Ryan, it characterises a meeting between Ryan and Glover as a crossing of new and traditional worlds - 'a YouTube star landing a feature-film role, and a Hollywood star joining the YouTube community'. The meeting leads to a sketch on Ryan's YouTube channel, where her online persona (Little Loca) happens across Glover at his home amidst the affluent trappings and vintage Bentleys. She exclaims 'Hey wait a minute. You look like McFly, fool…. Look at

this house and these cars… you ain't Crispin Glover the *movie star*?'. He responds 'Movie star. *That* guy? That guy's an *idiot*.' Recounted in a widely circulated but niche high-end magazine, successfully adapting to ground-breaking (in 2006) social media practice, here Glover simultaneously dismisses the traditional movie star identity as well as confirming it (he *is* George McFly and he *is* a Hollywood success: that *really is* his own collection of extraordinary and expensive cars).

The production and [re]circulation of cult status

In public discourse, Glover is *always* orientated to the reader/viewer via mainstream Hollywood, but as that fabricated exchange with a subcultural online star illustrates, this too occurs through cult discourse. There is a hierarchy of 'cultness' in both by which he is made accessible and recognisable; first through his supporting roles in the major films, *Back to the Future*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). Secondly, through his appearances in key films of American independent cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, *River's Edge*, *Twister* (1989) and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993), alongside other iconic American cult actors (Johnny Depp, Harry Dean Stanton and Dennis Hopper). His work with seminal independent auteurs is also cited; David Lynch (*Wild at Heart*), Gus Van Sant (*Even Cow Girls Get the Blues* [1993]) and Jim Jarmusch (*Dead Man* [1995]). Then his work in low-grade mainstream fare. *Epic Movie* (2006) and *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010), and a notorious appearance on David Letterman in 1987. Finally, if at all, his own projects *What Is It?* and *It is Fine. Everything is Fine!* (2007) or his leading roles in cult films, *Willard* (2000) and *Bartleby* (2001) are acknowledged. This is ironic, as the primary aim of his public appearances are to publicise the latter category.[vi]

We might discern an obvious trajectory through Glover's chronology; mainstream breakthrough in quirky supporting roles in the 1980s, consolidation of cult status during American independent cinema of the 1990s, opportunistic leading roles in minor films in the early 2000s, and a mix of minor-mainstream films with his self-directed projects post-2006**.** The quality and box-office success of the mainstream work and how it utilises the cult screen personality of 'Crispin Glover' declines as his personal pursuit of surrealist projects increases. However, off screen the cult star status of Glover is well-circulated in articles, interviews, podcasts and his own social media. Now more than ever, unusually for such an offbeat marginal figure, he is an accessible cultural presence in the international public domain with features and reviews in *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, The *Guardian* and the accolade of a true star, a *Daily Mail* commentary on his lack of aging.[vii] The contemporary 'knownness' of Glover-as-cult-star has been partly cultivated away from his control, most notably through the repositioning of *Back to the Future* as a cult text through audience nostalgia (Pett 2013) and he has become the cast member with the most sustained profile in contemporary extratextual material. Whilst willing to reflect on the film, his focus is usually his lawsuit with the producers for hiring another actor as George McFly and using prosthetics to disguise him as Glover in *Back to the Future II* (1989). Although Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd recently appeared in a number of sketches on American television to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the film, neither participate in many interviews anymore. So, whilst, as Colin McEnroe noted before interviewing Glover, 'his body of work is very much at odds with *Back to the Future* and all the mainstream success it symbolizes' (2013), this distance is eroded by the cultification of the trilogy by fans, which Glover's existing cult status (and contentious history with the film) contributes to. No longer standing apart from the film text due to the obvious differences of his eccentric cult identity and performance style, both the film trilogy and Glover's 'cultness' are continually shifting.

Away from nostalgic reappraisals of this cult blockbuster, it is primarily Glover's non-naturalist performance style that first produced and then characterised his cult status. This style is apparent in his appearance as McFly where, compared to the other actors, he is overly-mannered in his delivery and exaggerated in his physicality. His co-star Lea Thompson described his rehearsal technique was 'awesome' but 'weird' (Parker 2015). Such an approach typifies his work in his mainstream and independent films, notably as Layne in *River's Edge,* a performance described as "seem[ing] out of sync with the less stylized behavior of the film's other actors" (Geeslin 1987). I have written elsewhere about how Glover's stylised acting supports mainstream performance, helping to emphatically define and ground leading characters (as stars) as 'ordinary' and 'normal' in response to him, characteristic of the function of character actors more widely (Thomas 2012: 44-45).

Beyond this, Glover's excessive acting adds to the atmosphere required by films that require audiences to suspend disbelief outside genre expectations, such as the time-travel elements in *Back to the Future* – ostensibly a teen film. This is particularly true of *River's Edge* which dramatises the murder of a young girl and its aftermath, committed and covered up by members of an offbeat small-town clique. An ambiguous film that offers no easy answers to the crime or the cover-up, its unpredictable mood is anchored and intensified by the disruptive performances of Glover and other significant cult star, Dennis Hopper. Through Glover's performative choices in these films (*River's Edge* to *Willard* and beyond) these texts position themselves as cult artefacts, the acting working in conjunction with other formal elements such as narrative, soundtrack and mise en scène that are used in unconventional ways. As such, Glover's acting can be defined as 'formalist' whereby its production *and* value lies in the self-conscious artificiality of its excess. In Glover's case, this sits comfortably within films that also strive to unsettle, rather than standing against the film as 'hammy' performance does (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 82-84). This creates continuity

between the oddness of his characters and the mode by which he depicts them, rather than the distancing bathos or 'self reflexivity' of other cult acting that relies on displaying the cult of personality onscreen. By favouring a style that, though formalist (not naturalist) technique, enables Glover to embody (or disappear into) the character, each characters' weirdness is represented as more authentic and therefore more believable within each film's odd storyworld. Glover characterises his acting in this way defining it as 'heightened reality', stating he does not believe naturalism with its underplayed small gestures 'reflects the truth of drama or psychology'. Instead, his 'heightened reality' shows the 'intention of the character to its fullest extent' at the same time as allowing the 'skill of the actor' to be observed.[viii]

The intensity and acute characterisation of Glover's acting remains key to the actor's cult status, negating the *very* mainstream work he has undertaken. Returning to the dissemination of Glover's stardom via contemporary social media, in 2016 the YouTube channel 'No Small Parts' (filmmaker, actor and cult fan, Brandon Hardesty) produced an episode on Glover. Normally short commentaries of 30 minutes or less on actors 'that nobody knows about, but have a recognisable face', the extended Glover episode (46 mins) acknowledged his wider fame, but that "his phenomenal acting work" of "strange and unique performances" necessitated a full deconstruction of the "100% original" man. It is this unique performance style and commitment to embodying a role that explains much of Glover's public celebrity (and its image of eccentricity) as it was showcased to a mainstream American television audience in 1987 with Glover's bizarre appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Dressed, as would be revealed four years later on the film's eventual release, as the character Rubin from *Rubin and Ed* (1991), Glover appeared incoherent and confrontational, attempting to kick Letterman in the head. A search for 'Crispin Glover' on YouTube reveals that this is by far the most uploaded clip of the actor, and apart from *Back to the Future*,

likely to be many peoples' first encounter with him. Glover is constantly asked about this incident but refuses to clarify whether he was acting in-character: 'I have neither confirmed nor denied in media whether or not that was me on the 1987 *Late Night with David Letterman* appearance'.[ix] It has come to be considered as a performance art stunt; a precursor to Joaquin Phoenix's extended 'in-character' public appearances for the mockumentary *I'm Still Here* (2010), reinventing it as another of the 'pleasures' of Glover's acting and subversive cult identity in its constant online recirculation.[x]

Whilst these on and off screen performances by Glover emanate from his own deliberate artistic intent, his contemporary cult status is also maintained by other producers and users, especially via social media. Although not through his own active agency, they contribute to his subcultural identity and can be seen neatly in the fan-produced video which loops a short, almost negligible sequence from Glover's appearance in *Friday 13th: The Final Chapter* (1984).[xi] For over five minutes, it rewinds and repeats a moment of Glover dancing in an exaggerated manner (10 seconds in the original film). This clip is heavily recirculated around internet platforms and has become a meme, changing its form as other users have adapted and extended into gifs. In line with early summations of online media's shifting of conceptions of stardom, 'Crispin Glover' has become a hyperlink "connecting the many and various contexts of star presence" (McDonald 2003: 42); a personality created by online users and adding to his star identity.

The *Friday 13th* meme has the opposite effect to Glover's intent in the sequence where overtness of form is employed in service of character psychology and, in his words, 'truth'. Gifs and other online texts displace the gesture from the diegetic narrative, distancing the viewer from any conception of the character, showcasing only the 'oddness' of Glover himself, reifying him and his performance through the lens of the 'cult of personality'. However, there is little tension between Glover (as niche artist) and these examples of more

populist celebrations of the actor (also including appreciation of his mainstream films), even if they (and elements of his star persona) exist outside his control. Instead, when asked to reflect on the meme, Letterman, *Charlie's Angels* or *Back to the Future*, Glover always engages with the topics and texts of his past, often citing these as favourite performances. When it is referenced in *The New Yorker* article that "YouTubers have watched the [Letterman] incident more than a quarter of a million times", he merely reflects "It's interesting now that there's this whole new life for it." (McGrath 2006).

These patterns of exchange, appreciation and [re-]circulation between Glover and his fans, and the role of social media platforms in sustaining his cult identity, position Glover as an exemplar of the postmodern subcultural celebrity. He has adapted to the digital landscape effectively, and if anything, the accessibility of this niche figure has only increased his star status. Glover maintains his own website (crispinglover.com), keeps updated Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts, and frequently participates in content-creation on major online community sites such as Nerdist podcasts and Reddit AMAs (Ask Me Anything). These processes align to Elizabeth Ellcessor's argument for 'a new kind of star system' where 'the workings of a star text of connection are formed through complicated interactions of media platforms, texts, audiences, and industries, facilitated by digital and social media' (2012: 75). The circulation and exhibition of Glover's stardom also illustrates Henry Jenkins et al's examination of contemporary hybrid content circulation in *Spreadable Media* where 'a mix of top-down and bottom-up determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways' (2013: 1), utilising online communication tools that create and circulate context in easy-to-share formats. This contrasts with models of traditional distribution, whereby now the public are no longer seen as consumers of pre-constructed messages, but as those who shape, share, reframe and remix media content 'not as isolated individuals but within larger communities' (ibid: 2). However, Glover is a more

complex case study of cult /subcultural stardom than this alone would suggest and the next section will discuss another element of Glover's professional life; the management of his own filmmaking projects, drawing on his use of both unconventional and traditional methods of distribution.

The distribution of cult status

To introduce 'spreadable media', Jenkins et al redefine conventional definitions of the term 'circulation' to illustrate how convergence cultures have changed the media landscape. The old use of 'circulation' is 'really talking about distribution' where 'distribution' is defined as a broadcast model where [corporate] 'producers create discrete and finished products for a mass audience' (ibid). This section considers how Glover produces, manages and distributes his own material and his close economic control over this. Whilst Glover does not create products for a 'mass audience', his working practices mirror Jenkins et al's further contextualistion of traditional distribution 'where the movement of media content is largely – or totally – controlled by the commercial interests producing and selling it' (ibid).

As a figure who constantly refers to himself as 'a working actor' (i.e that acting is a job dependent on labour, economies and institutions as much as it is an artistic, personal vocation) Glover is quick to discuss finance and employment in interviews, reflecting on his place in an industrial landscape. He is open about his financial motivation for making *Charlie's Angels*, declaring that 'I recognized in 2000 and 2001 that I really needed to make as much money as I could in order to fund my own filmmaking', prompting the interviewer to declare 'just because a man's eccentric doesn't mean he can't also be pragmatic' (Freeman 2015). He articulates the processes of Hollywood (from product to publicity), his position in this corporate system and the duties therein, telling another interviewer 'I have respect at this

point in my career as to what media is for as a businessperson and a filmmaker. I was paid to be in the movie. I enjoyed working with everybody. So, I'm here to do my job and I appreciate talking to you. My way of thinking about publicity is probably very different than it was 25 years ago' (Ryan 2012). '25 years ago' was the Letterman appearance, and it becomes clear in these publicity interviews that as Glover's star status and use of digital media has expanded, so too has his development of the way his work, stardom and career exists within a wider structure of economic realities.

Glover uses the term 'corporate' when talking about the mainstream Hollywood industry and modes of production, distribution and exhibition. In line with the auratic nature of his cult self-image this is always in conversations about his own projects, *What Is It?* And *It is Fine. Everything is Fine!* As well as its original intention of promoting the casting of performers with Downs Syndrome, Glover positions *What Is It*? as his 'psychological reaction to the corporate constraints that have happened with corporately funded distributed films' (ibid.), and articulation of his feelings towards the damaging influence of business interests on cultural production and how funding and distribution opportunities are limited for with films uncomfortable elements. It began as a project with the potential for corporate backing with 'various actors attached to it, David Lynch was going to be executive producer' but fell through when the corporate entity had questions about the viability" of making a movie with a predominantly Downs Syndrome cast (Bonner 2013). His later film also explores extreme subject matter (psychosexual fantasy) though and beyond disability into the crime/murder genre, adapting the autobiographical script of its main performer, cerebral palsy sufferer Steven C. Stewart. In terms of content and distribution, these films were conceived as challenges to mainstream industrial practice allowing Glover to 'put my artistic passions and questions into my own filmmaking' (Carter 2015), play the rebellious outsider and self-finance films unlikely to gain any conventional distribution. Indeed the most orthodox

exhibition of *What is It?* and *It is Fine. Everything is Fine!* were their selections for the Sundance Film Festival in 2005 and 2007.

I say 'unlikely' because apart from Sundance, Glover has never actually offered these films for conventional distribution or exhibition. Instead he has implemented a tightly controlled practice in which he meticulously manages every aspect of production, distribution, exhibition, and promotion. This positions them differently to other types of cult texts, from the repositioning of mainstream into cult (*Back to the Future*), the spreadable bottom-up circulation of fan-favourites (*The Big Lebowski*), semi-restricted circulation via midnight cinema and television screenings and/or niche label DVD releases (*The Room*, *Pink Flamingos*), and even those that have been officially removed from circulation by the litigious actions of other institutional powers against the filmmakers/distributors, but may be acquired in through bootlegs (*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*). The only way to see Glover's films is to attend his screening/Q&A events that tour art cinemas worldwide, such as 'Crispin Glover's Big Slide Show' and according to his website 'Any other current means of viewing his films other than at his live shows is not approved'. He explains this decision as one determined by economic necessity; the films are self-funded and this personal investment requires a good financial return, which he believes is best generated from the 'Slide Show' exhibition format. This restricted distribution prevents breach of copyright of the films, which is a major priority of Glover's. Whilst happy for the 'bottom-up' recirculation of mainstream content like the Letterman appearance, the prospect of a YouTube bootleg of his films is 'something I would be very litigious about' (McGrath 2006). He has commented 'I am in control of the distribution and personally supervise the monetary intake of the films that I am touring with. I also control piracy in this way because digital copy of this film is stolen material and highly prosecutable' (Douglas 2012). As one interviewer emphatically declared, Glover is 'a man who owns his own work'.[xii]

The unsettling nature of films and Glover's strategy of self-distribution are framed as anti-corporate stance, driven by artistic integrity. It is certainly this, but in his singular management of production, distribution and exhibition it is also a means of control that mimics a mainstream corporate strategy; the vertical integration of the classical Hollywood studio system. It remains recognisably bound by a 'cult' identity and the financial returns are much smaller, but it remains a coherent business model that enforces strict legislative control and circulation of product. He even self-regulates admitting only over 18s, calling this 'a good law'.[xiii] Glover describes the 'Slide Show' experience as akin to classical practices: '[Prior] to the 1950s, people exclusively saw films in movie theaters. The films were able to recoup and profit at that time in that fashion' (Carter 2015). His practice is reminiscent of the blockbuster roadshow format of Hollywood exhibition of the 1950s, where prestigious or extraordinary films were showcased in limited runs on an exclusive reserved-seat basis, often with supplementary programme material, and where 'the goal was to keep the picture in circulation for as long as possible in order to tap its maximum box-office potential' (Hall and Neale 2010: 160). Glover has been touring *What Is It?* for ten years, mainly exhibiting in exclusive theatres in major urban areas, often multiple times. Returning to Jenkins et al on contemporary modes of circulation, here Glover's circulation of cult product, stardom and identity has moved away from concepts of participation, hybridity and community back towards the traditional definition of 'distribution' as media content controlled by the interests producing and selling it. Glover aligns himself with this traditional mode, stating 'distribution, of course, means to make available to the public, which I most certainly have done' (Carter 2015). It resembles what Jenkins at al call the 'stickiness model' of circulation, which 'privileges putting content in one place and making audiences come to it so they can be measured' (2013: 5).

The juxtaposition of Glover's cult, offbeat identity with his firm control over all elements of production suggests almost a cult parody of the classical mogul. He positions himself within and without the contemporary Hollywood system, using its desire to cast him in eccentric character roles, conforming to promotional duties and challenging it through his unsettling non-mainstream works and microcosm of economic organisation and monopolistic power. This power even extends to publicity material; theoretically Glover is open and accessible, willingness to discuss anything from using Hollywood for his own benefit, approaches to acting, and his conflict with *Back to the Future's* Bob Gale. However, whilst this creates a sense of intimacy authenticity, its method of delivery is unusual and also about maintaining control over content, and therefore how it should be interpreted. The majority of Glover's responses to questions across his interviews are remarkably similar, often literally word-for-word. This is because, as he occasionally discusses, he relies upon a 'crib sheet' with pre-prepared and memorised answers to frequently-asked questions. As he describes 'I normally answer questions from a 1600 word page document that I have saved from my written interviews over the last 9 years of touring with my live shows and feature films I have directed. This means I can use that resource to answer certain commonly asked questions and respond in more detail to less commonly asked questions'.[xiv] From this self-curated archive he has become his own studio publicity department, recycling stock answers and wholly in charge of content creation. He even restricts the visual imagery of himself, distributing a limited set of publicity photographs with the same black and white head shot of Glover illustrating numerous interviews: one example is captioned 'A photo Crispin Glover emailed to *The Australian* of himself' (Douglas 2012). For a man who collects vintage Bentleys and lives in a Czech castle, this is unlikely to be due to the expense of updating high quality head-shots.

Typical of celebrity practice and Hollywood manufacture of classical stardom these encounters provide 'the illusion of intimacy' (Schickel 1985: 4) and is symptomatic of how Glover carefully adopts and adapts systemic 'corporate' practices and applies them to cult/artistic projects and his own management of his cult star persona. He engages, but on his own artistic and economic terms and distributes a coherent, unwavering star image; the cult aura of 'Crispin Glover'. This production of stardom works together, and apart from, the participatory user-generated online content recirculated by Glover aficionados. As such, Glover is very much anchored to mainstream Hollywood; it helps orientate the public to him, notably *a specific public*; cult audiences who have embraced his embodiment of that image and who have in turn repositioned what 'cult' is and how Glover is placed in this context. In the industry's employment of him, Hollywood showcases his eccentricity by making overt his 'heightened reality' on and off screen, and also enabling the financing of his own alterative, independent works. Although the embodiment of the excessive, offbeat, uncontrolled cult star personality, in his carefully considered business model and management strategies that cohere production, distribution, exhibition and promotion, Glover is also indicative of longevity of the traditional Hollywood economic system, albeit now maintained through cult channels. He stands as an authentic cult star, but one concurrently and nuancedly embedded within mainstream Hollywood.

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[i] http://www.crispinglover.com/statement.htm

[ii] http://crispinglover.com/slideshow.htm

[iii] http://madmuseum.org/series/it-crispin-hellion-glover

[iv] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH6b_lSQst0

[v] 'Into the Night': Juliette Lewis interviews Crispin Glover, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vuow8wlWwdk

[vi] For example, an interview with *The Guardian* focuses on *Back to the Future* at length and then briefly mentioning the DVD release of *The Carrier* (renamed *The Bag Man*). Only the end line reveals Glover is screening *It Is Fine. Everything is Fine!* at the ICA in London (Freeman 2014)

[vii] Eleanor Gower 2013.

[viii] All quotes from YouTube interview with ExploreTalent.com 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAwTdcYwp3s

[ix] Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) 2014. https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/1ywe62/crispin_hellion_glover_actor_and_filmmaker_more/

[x] Glover continued to appear on mainstream talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s, even returning to Letterman three weeks later as 'himself'.

[xi] Uploaded by jaybauman, 12th April 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UkJl8FmiMk

[xii] YouTube interview, Mad Bros Media, November 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIANCEug6OY

[xiii] ibid.

[xiv] Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) 2014.